

Owners plan to resurrect New Liberty Theatre from ashes

■ The community-oriented movie house in Camas, Wash., that drew audiences from miles away will be rebuilt after a recent fire

By LARRY SHAW
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CAMAS, Wash. — The words on the New Liberty Theatre marquee say it all: "We'll be back."

It was a little more than a week ago that the early-morning telephone call came to owners Toni Ness and Cathy Asher: Their theater was on fire.

"We were devastated," Asher said last week, sifting through rubble.

"When we saw it," said Asher, 43, "we said, 'This is it.'"

It was an emotional moment for the two women, who bought the theater in 1984.

The fire caused an estimated \$400,000 to \$500,000 in damage and was the second major blaze in downtown Camas in the past 14 months. A fire in July 1993 destroyed Crown Home Furnishings across Fourth Avenue. It since has been rebuilt.

The theater fire was thought to be caused by a smoldering cigarette in a trash bin.

However, Ness, 47, said a professional arson inspector believes it

was caused by a faulty ballast in an overhead fluorescent light.

"Circa 1948," she said, grimacing.

The theater opened in 1927 as the Granada. It was reminiscent of the neighborhood movie houses in the Portland area — the Egyptian, the Paramount, the Oriental, the Hollywood, the Kenton and the Lombard.

When Ness and Asher decided to go into the movie business, they wanted their theater to offer "a community movie house," Asher said.

However, they realized the picture show entertainment business had changed over the years.

"We tried to be very careful with our (movie) selection," offering mostly PG and PG-13 movies and not too many R ratings.

In fact, the theater was showing the Walt Disney movie "Honey, I Shrunk the Kids" in November 1989 when Westley Allan Dodd, who would die on the gallows in the Washington State Penitentiary four years later, sauntered out of the men's restroom, a 6-year-old boy slung over his shoulder.

Once outside, the boy was able to



PATRICIA CORDELL/The Oregonian

Theresa M. Lind piles burned items in a box outside the New Liberty Theatre in Camas. Lind works for Dow Columbia, whose specialty is fire restoration.

bolt away, and an alert passerby grabbed Dodd, marching the killer of three boys back to the theater until police arrived.

Community support

As with all fires, the curious soon began to appear on the scene.

Although Ness and Asher thought their business venture had gone up in flames, business neighbors and other Camas residents had other

ideas.

"People wanted their theater back," Asher said. Not surprising, given that customers come from as far away as Seattle and Hillsboro.

"They offered support. They said, 'We're not going to let you go.' How can you turn your back on that?"

After a little deliberation, they decided they couldn't.

Two days later the marquee read, "We'll be back."

Community support, said Ness, has "just been overwhelming."

The two met with their insurance agent Friday. In addition, a donation fund has been set up at Riverview Savings Bank. The Camas Girl Scout Troop plans a car wash later this month. Jody Olsen, owner of Sew What's New, has organized a rummage sale and auction in front of the theater for Sept. 24.

Others have offered to assist in any way they can.

"It's amazing what people have offered," Ness said. "From strong backs and bodies to help clear out the mess to people offering to recover the seats for us."

Asher said the Liberty could reopen around the first of the year.

"We've been told it would probably take at least four months to do the cleanup work and get the theater back in operation," Ness said. "We're hoping to start the new year with a bang."

Meanwhile, the two women are looking for work. "We have to put food on the table and pay the mortgage," Asher said.

And Ness, wearing a T-shirt that read, "Quit? Never, never," pointed to the marquee.

"That says it all."